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SUBJECT: VISIT TO UMM QASR BY ORHA DIRECTOR AND SENIOR STAFF

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RICHARD H. JONES; REASON: 1.5 (A)

1. (C) SUMMARY: ORHA Director Lt. Gen. Jay Garner (ret.), accompanied by ORHA senior staff, visited the liberated Iraqi port city of Umm Qasr on April 1. The ORHA team met with the commanding officers of the British forces holding both the port facilities and the town. The port and associated rail line are in relatively good shape; the town is in a highly degraded condition, due more to grinding poverty and recent looting than to military action. British officers reported success in standing up the port's freight-handling facilities and restoring electric power and drinking water to the town. The entire local administrative and government apparatus in Umm Qasr has dissolved, as local Baath officials have fled the town to avoid revenge and retaliation by citizens venting their fury. The inhabitants suspect that coalition forces will not in fact stay the course, fear that the Baathist regime will survive in the end, and are consequently terrified of retaliation from the regime's security forces, should they opt to cooperate with coalition forces. There has been no violence between Sunni and Shi'ite believers in the town, and both mosques are functioning normally. ORHA leadership is considering deploying a team to Umm Qasr within a week to begin operations inside liberated Iraq. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The Road to Umm Qasr: ORHA Director Garner and members of his senior staff visited the liberated Iraqi town of Umm Qasr (population: 20,000) on the Shatt al-Arab on April 1, in the company of British General Albert Whitley. British General Timothy Cross, a member of the ORHA senior staff, took part in the trip, as well as State Department Officer Michael Gfoeller and British Foreign Office representative Simon Elvy. The trip from Kuwait City to the border was uneventful, as was the border crossing. Numerous military vehicles were in evidence, including coalition convoys guarded by heavy machine guns. The obviously peaceful border zone was full of large herds of sheep and camels accompanied by Beduin herdsmen.

3. (U) Progress in the Port: The ORHA team was briefed by three senior British officers: the commander of joint force logistics for Umm Qasr, Brigadier General Sean Cowlam, the commander of the 17th Port and Maritime Regiment, Lt. Col. Paul Ash, and the commander of the Royal Marines in Umm Qasr, Col. Steven Cox. According to them, British forces have succeeded in clearing most of the port area of mines. The entire area, including both the old and new ports and the town, are firmly in coalition hands. In the old port, berths 5 through 10 have been repaired, as have all berths in the new port. A superficial examination of the new port revealed an apparently operational facility, currently hosting a large coalition military presence. The Shatt al-Arab channel, however, is silting up, since dredging operations have been reduced sharply since the start of the war. Before the war, it took eight dredging vessels working 24-hours a day to keep the channel clear; only two dredgers are in service now. Coalition forces are planning to bring in more from Kuwait. The local rail line is undamaged, according to coalition officers.

4. (U) Water and Electricity Restored: Coalition officers reported that they restored electricity to 75 percent of the town two days ago. The power comes from a local generator bank. The voltage, normally 220 volts, is at present only 180 volts. The local population therefore has light, but cannot operate such devices as air conditioners or electric motors.

A 2.5 kilometer pipeline has been run from Kuwait to a point just inside the city and the Iraqi border, to a location in the old UN compound. Tanker trucks are filled there with drinking water, at no charge. The truck drivers then sell the water to city residents for 25 Iraqi dinars per liter. This arrangement has mitigated the formerly extreme lack of water in the town. That said, water is "liquid gold" in Umm Qasr, according to the British forces there, and the drinking water terminal at the UN compound is heavily fortified to prevent rioting. It is surrounded by a 12-foot fence topped by razor wire and guarded by heavy machine guns in sandbag emplacements and numerous troops. Iraqis in ragged clothing could be observed just beyond the fence, holding empty water cans.

5. (U) The Local Administration Melts Away: State officer and Foreign Office representative Elvy spoke with two local inhabitants, both middle class professionals, who have stepped forward along with several other residents to cooperate with the British forces. They explained that the entire government administrative apparatus in Umm Qasr

dissolved as soon as the coalition forces moved in. The entire 40-man police force deserted, both officers and rank-and-file policemen, and at present there are no local police in the town. The rest of the government administration collapsed as well. Nearly all Baath officials in Umm Qasr fled to Basra to avoid falling prey to acts of revenge by the citizenry.

16. (U) Omnipresent Poverty: The town in fact seemed full of impoverished people wandering aimlessly. There was no organized market in evidence, although individuals could be observed selling drinking water by the side of the road. There were many beggars, mostly children. Though obviously poor, the population did appear adequately fed. There is no shortage of grain locally, though meat and milk are in short supply. Asked by ORHA staffers what level of salary would enable a local person to survive in an austere fashion, they replied that \$50 per month is the minimum, while \$100 per month would allow a more comfortable existence, if hardly an affluent one. They stressed the fact that the local economy is at a standstill and will remain so until the port reopens.

17. (C) Terror of the Regime: The local citizens with whom ORHA officials spoke said that coalition forces should expect similar scenarios to develop as further towns are secured. The hatred of the local population for Baathist officials is so extreme that they will try to take vengeance on them, once the party's power has been broken. The regime is striking back, they noted, by deploying members of many different security agencies: the Saddam Fedayeen, the Security Forces, the Special Security Forces, etc. Members of these forces can infiltrate themselves easily into coalition-held territory, the local residents said, since they operate in civilian attire. Such elements operating out of Basra have free access to Umm Qasr, they noted. "The road to Basra is open," one resident said. A resident who has cooperated actively with coalition forces reported that he has received death threats, and in fact he appeared deeply terrified by the possibility that he would soon be killed in retaliation for cooperating with the coalition.

18. (C) The local residents added that the population of Umm Qasr is largely unwilling to cooperate openly with the coalition because they are gripped by terror. People doubt that the US and the coalition have the staying power to achieve a final victory over the Baathist regime, and they fear that Saddam will somehow survive in the end and return to take vengeance on them if they work with us. This fear can be reduced only once coalition forces take Basra, and it can be eliminated only after Baghdad has fallen, they said. Nevertheless, the British forces have succeeded in hiring 120 local men to work in the port, at rates of pay varying from \$3 to \$5 per day. Some 60 men reportedly refused to work in the port because they were warned not to by the Iraqi security services.

19. (C) Comment: It is impossible to overstate the extent to which the local population in Umm Qasr still fears the regime. The terror felt by local residents reminded the State officer present, who served several tours in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, of the deep fear Soviet citizens once had of the KGB. Overcoming this psychological obstacle to re-establishing normal governance in Umm Qasr will require several things, further progress on the battlefield chief among them. Once Basra is firmly in coalition hands, people in Umm Qasr and other towns and cities across Iraq will probably take heart and begin to believe that the regime will actually fall this time, and their readiness to work with us may well rise then. The implementation of relief and recovery operations will also boost confidence. The local inhabitants with whom ORHA staff spoke may represent hope for the future. They and others like them will gradually emerge to take over the reins of governance, Deo volente. While inexperienced, many of them will be largely untainted by the Baathist regime. The challenge will be to work with such people and the surviving elements of the bureaucracy to re-establish order and lay a foundation for a democratic future in Iraq.

JONES